

## ENTRY

# James Bowser (b. ca. 1730)

## SUMMARY

James Bowser was a Continental army soldier during the American Revolution (1775–1783), one of about 5,000 African Americans to serve in the Patriots’ army or navy. Born in Nansemond County, Bowser probably first joined the army in 1778 or 1779, fighting in Pennsylvania and then Virginia. He likely was present at the siege of Yorktown. There were two James Bowsers from Virginia, probably related, who fought during the war and distinguishing their lives has become difficult. Bowser was fifty-three when he left the army, and the date and place of his death are unknown.



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**Continental Army  
Soldiers**

Contributor: ***Sylvia R. Frey***

Contributor: ***the Dictionary of Virginia Biography***

**B**owser was born about 1730, probably in Nansemond County. The names of his parents are not known, but his ancestors included persons of both African and European or Native American descent. Local parish

records in 1760 and 1762 document medical treatment for “Bowsers Wife” and “Mary Bowzer” but fail to disclose whether one or two women were involved or their relationship to James Bowser. According to family tradition he was a farmer who was born free.

James Bowser’s name first appears in a 1780 army size roll that records data on certain Virginians enlisting or reenlisting in the Continental army. He was described as a man of mixed race background with black hair and eyes, about fifty years old and five feet, six and three-quarters inches tall. Bowser enlisted for eighteen months on September 26, 1780. General John Peter Gabriel Muhlenberg and Colonel Thomas Meriwether certified in May 1783 that by then Bowser had served in the Continental army for four years.

Bowser probably first joined the army late in 1778 or early in 1779 as part of the 1st Regiment, Virginia State Line, becoming one of approximately 5,000 men of African descent who served in the Continental army or navy during the American Revolution. During his first enlistment he may have served under



**Washington and Lafayette at the  
Battle of Yorktown**

Muhlenberg in Pennsylvania or New Jersey. After reenlisting in 1780 Bowser joined a rendezvous of about 500 other Continental soldiers in Chesterfield County and went on

active duty in Virginia. He was very likely present at the siege of Yorktown in October 1781. Bowser differed greatly from most of his fellow soldiers, being twenty-five or thirty years older than most privates, serving longer in the Continental army, and as an African American. The southern state governments had not encouraged the enlistment of African Americans early in the war, but as enlistment quotas became progressively harder to meet, Virginia began enlisting black men. Bowser may have been among the first. Some of the African American soldiers acted as guides or spies, but most probably served in support or logistical roles rather than on the front lines. Having served to the war's end, he was issued a warrant in May 1783 for 200 acres in Ohio.

Another James Bowser from Nansemond County, who was nineteen years old in 1782, also served in the Continental army. The two men were probably related, and later traditions may have conflated episodes in their lives.

In 1828 Bowser's name appeared on an official list of Revolutionary War officers and soldiers who were entitled to but had not applied for or who had not received their land bounties. In mid-October 1833 eight free African Americans of Nansemond County established to the satisfaction of a local justice of the peace that they were Bowser's heirs at law, and with his service as a private in the Continental army proved, on February 26 and March 20, 1834, Governor John Floyd certified that the heirs were entitled to receive the warrant, "if not heretofore drawn."

The date and place of James Bowser's death are not known. He was fifty-three years old when his enlistment expired, and he may have died not long after the war ended. His

name does not appear on any extant late-eighteenth-century Nansemond County tax list, but he may have owned no taxable property. Bowser family members remained in Nansemond and the lower Tidewater for generations. The heirs who filed in the 1830s may not all have been literate, but they were all free. After the end of slavery one family member, Florence Brickhouse Bowser, founded a school, which was later named for her, in nearby Driver. In August 1981 a state historical highway marker was erected near the site of the Bowser farm to commemorate the service of one of the few identified African American Continental army soldiers from Nansemond County.

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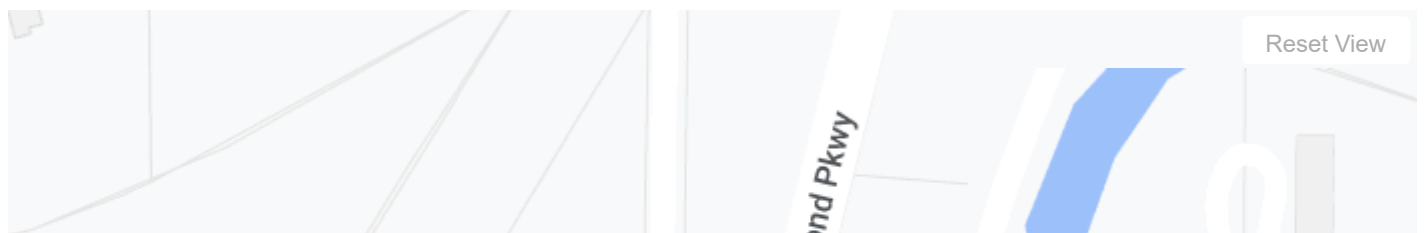
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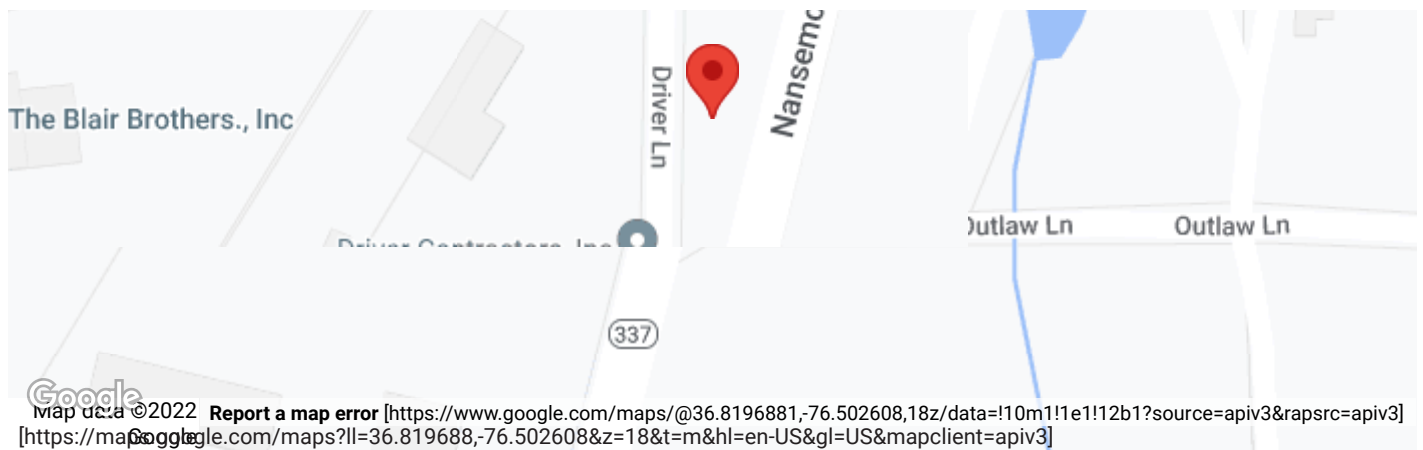
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## MAP





## TIMELINE

### **ca. 1730**

James Bowser is born, probably in Nansmond County. He was of mixed race and probably free.

### **September 26, 1780**

James Bowser enlists in the Continental army for eighteen months.

### **May 1783**

James Bowser is certified as having served in the Continental army for four years. He is issued a warrant for 200 acres in Ohio.

### **1828**

James Bowser's appears on a list of Revolutionary War veterans who have not claimed their land bounty.

### **Mid-October 1833**

The heirs of the Revolutionary War veteran James Bowser claim his land bounty.

### **August 1981**

A state historical highway marker is erected near the site of the James Bowser farm to commemorate his service in the Revolutionary War.

## FURTHER READING

Frey, Sylvia R. "Bowser, James." In the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, Vol. 2, edited by Sara B. Bearss, John T. Kneebone, J. Jefferson Looney, Brent Tarter, and Sandra Gioia Treadway, 158–159. Richmond: Library of Virginia, 2001.

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